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Marcer, Elisenda

DOI:

[10.3828/jrs.2019.17](https://doi.org/10.3828/jrs.2019.17)

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Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Marcer, E 2019, 'Between bodies: animality and vulnerability in La mosquitera (2010) by Agustí Vila', *Journal of Romance Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 283-301. <https://doi.org/10.3828/jrs.2019.17>

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Between bodies: Animality and Vulnerability in *La mosquitera* (2010) by Agustí Vila

Elisenda Marcer

University of Birmingham

Abstract:

The 2010 Catalan film *La mosquitera* (The Mosquito Net, 2010) by Agustí Vila will here be situated within the context of the strand of European cinematographic tradition that has addressed animality as an element of philosophical, ontological and aesthetic reflection. The film not only establishes a dialogue with national and international films that deal with this topic (for example, *Caniche* [1979] by Bigas Luna or *Dogtooth* [2009] by the Greek director Yorgos Lanthimos), but also, with its representation of the ambiguous space between animality and humanity. Here I argue that these aspects of the film force the spectator to re-think the limits of dominant anthropocentric perspectives on literary and visual texts. Drawing on contemporary scholarship in the field of Animal Studies and placing it in dialogue with André Bazin's reconceptualisation of the material ontology of film, I will analyse questions of materiality and vulnerability in Vila's film by considering aesthetic and ethical relations as well as the responses that these elicit.

Keywords: Animal Studies, *La mosquitera*, Agustí Vila, vulnerability, empathy, materiality

Setting the context and the conceptual framework

Screened for the first time in Barcelona in 2010, *La mosquitera* (The Mosquito Net) met with a largely lukewarm reception from film critics and audiences alike. The reviews published at the time locate the film between the genres of comedy and tragedy, describing it as a piece that explores the limits of reality as well as a projection of the desires and failings of a bourgeois family (Pumares 2010; Carrón 2010). Other references to the film stressed the skilful performance of the actors, in particular Emma Suárez's impressive turn as Alícia, and focused their attention on the social criticism of modern values that underlies the main plot of the film. Surprisingly, none of the extant analyses valued either its innovative visual features or its uniqueness in addressing animality as an element of philosophical and aesthetic reflection in the Catalan and Spanish cinematographic traditions. Yet, Vila's film not only establishes a dialogue with national and international films that deal with the theme of animality, such as Bigas Lunas's unsettling *Caniche* [1979] or the more recent *Dogtooth* [2009] by the Greek director Yorgos Lanthimos, but succeeds in recreating an ambiguous space between the animal and the human that encourages audiences to re-evaluate the centre location of the human in visual and literary cultural production.

Drawing on contemporary scholarship in the field of Animal Studies and placing it in dialogue with André Bazin's reconceptualisation of the material ontology of film, I will examine Vila's framing of the materiality and vulnerability of the visual animal, reflecting on the aesthetic and ethical relations and responses it entails. Key to my reading of *La mosquitera*, is Anat Pick's formulation of the notion of vulnerability developed in her book *Creaturely Poetics* (2011). Basing her argument on Derrida's writing about the ambiguous nature of the division between human-animal (2002: 143),

Pick uses the term ‘creaturely’ to describe how corporeality and embodiment function as agents that determine reasoning and thought and, in so doing, she goes beyond humanist and anthropologist thinking which has traditionally situated man at the centre of knowledge. With this concept, she proposes a new way of analysis that understands the living body as material, temporal and vulnerable (Pick 2011: 5). Pick’s creaturely places an emphasis on the unclear boundaries between the human and the non-human, yet it also addresses ethical responses to questions of vulnerability.

These two aspects of Pick’s writing are central to my analysis of the way in which the interaction between humans and animals is represented in *La mosquitera* insofar as the film calls for an ethical response to the representation of the body, in particular, the naked, the ailing, and the defenceless body. My exploration of animality will entail an investigation of how animals figure as part of the plot; the forms in which they feature (wild or domesticated, alive, dead or visual representations); and the manner in which their rules and behaviours become more prevalent as the film advances by gradually transforming the human habitat into an animal one, collapsing and questioning the limits of the family as a notion exclusive to the human domain.

Since Derrida’s renowned lectures *The Animal That Therefore I Am* ([1997] 2002), there has been a significant development in the field of Animal Studies (Calarco 2008; Coetzee 1999; Burt 2002; Wolf 2009), which has focused primarily on questions of animal agency. More recently, the publication of the special issue *Animals in Visual Hispanism* (2017), edited by Jo Evans and Sarah Wright is exemplary of the animal turn that has taken place in the field of Iberian Studies. The edition offers a compelling and varied contribution to scholarship in animality with insightful analyses of the corporeal links between the realms of the human and the non-human, critical engagement with

questions of human and animal rights, studies of the symbolic value ascribed to animals in cultural production, as well as investigations of the politics of the posthuman. While my analysis of the body in *La mosquitera* is in line with the debates raised in this issue, here I propose to go beyond the study of the fragility of the contours of the human and the non-human by focusing instead on the ambiguity of these limits as a means of problematising and/or distorting established social, human and animal hierarchies. More specifically, in this article I examine the ways in which the blurring of the limits of the corporeal destabilises the social organism, but also how it challenges its basic structures, that is, the nuclear family, and most importantly, the manner in which it conditions an ethical response to the vulnerability of matter.

At first sight, the plot is a simple one: the film portrays the progressive disintegration of a middle-class marriage going through a mid-life crisis, with a drug addict teenage boy Lluís (Marcos Franz) with whom both parents are unable to communicate verbally and emotionally. Rather than facing up to the prevailing tensions within the family, the protagonist couple Alicia and Miquel (Eduard Fernández) deny all kinds of conflicts by masking them with an increasing sequence of tenacious lies that push them beyond the domain of ethics and morality. This compulsive denial and avoidance of real problems is not constrained to the nuclear family members, but expands out towards the relationships they establish with other characters and members of the extended family. For example, Miquel's severely ill parents, Maria (Geraldine Chaplin) and Robert (Fermí Reixach), who suffer from Alzheimer and depression respectively, plan a failed attempt to suicide. However, when Miquel finds them nearly unconscious in their kitchen after having inhaled gas voluntarily, there is no overt discussion about the event and conversation between them falls naturally into the usual

topics. Similarly, Miquel's sexual relationship with the younger cleaner of the family home, Ana, and Alicia's sexual encounters with her son's friend, Sergi, are either disavowed or covered up with lies and the couple eventually reunites after their illicit relationships as if nothing had happened. Throughout the film, the characters repeatedly enact similar patterns of gender violence and domestic abuse yet these are constantly negated. Thus, key thematic and formal aspects of *La Mosquitera* come under the umbrella of the film's central theme: the family. In this regard it is relevant to note that behind a thin patina of normality the fictional family ends up reproducing the inevitable processes of neurotic normalisation that, as Mark Fisher has observed (2011:22), will deform the unity of the household. By means of portraying the escalating crisis of Alicia's family, *La mosquitera* interrogates the foundations of the notion of the family unit, situating it at the intersection between the most primary corporeal functions and social construction's most perverse and manipulative needs.

In its focus on family deception, the film foregrounds the traits that Alain Badiou (2007:76) deemed characteristic of the 'pathogenic' qualities of family; in other words, those elements that render the family a means to restore power and authority without question. Interpreted in this light, a household that is protective of its borders endeavours to construct a confined domestic space in order to impose its own, supposedly civilised rules to protect its members from possible threats from the outside world. This image of captivity, which responds to the metaphor of the mosquito net, harks back to one of the parallelisms that Vila establishes with the European cinema tradition. More precisely, I am referring to the opening scene in Yanthimo's *Dogtooth*, which shows the walls of the residential home where the family members live as recluses. In the case of *Dogtooth*, the family is ruled by the despotic husband and father

(the only member of the family with the authority to have a relation with the external world), who imposes an even more disturbing regime of rules and habits, backed up by a language specifically invented to be used in that particular confined habitat.¹ In contrast to the villa in *Dogtooth*, the inhabitants of the Barcelona Eixample apartment of *La mosquitera* are able to transit between the interior and the exterior of the family home. However, as the film advances, this freedom of movement becomes restricted by the peaceful, albeit disturbing, invasion of domestic animals which will eventually turn the home into a zoomorphic space. This gradual transformation of a human habitat into an animal one, where nature – despite being urban and domestic – distorts the norms of coexistence of the family unit, is, without a doubt, one of the most interesting aspects of the film, insofar as it can be interpreted within the conceptual framework of animality.

In her ground-breaking work of 2011, *Creaturely Poetics*, Anat Pick reminds us that the process of dehumanisation used as a means of repression has a long history,² yet she also makes us aware of the fact that dehumanisation is not devoid of positive aspects, as it vindicates nonhuman subjectivities. This principle is certainly true of *La mosquitera* and connects the film, once more, with other experimental works of international cinema. For example, the images of the corridors, living rooms and bedrooms of the Eixample apartment occupied by dogs, cats and the odd dead body of a pigeon are evocative of some sequences of the documentary *About Love* (2005) by Vladimir Tyunkin.³ Taking into account the thematic and conceptual links that *La mosquitera* establishes with films such as *Dogtooth* or *About Love*, it can be argued that it is a visual text that exceeds national boundaries and establishes intermedial dialogue with a diversity of films and documentaries characterised by their experimental ambition. Interestingly, such transgression of national and international cinematic

boundaries is seemingly mirrored in the manner in which both the animal and human bodies that inhabit the domestic space transgress and destabilise social and moral conventions. In relation to this point, it is worth recalling the question that Vila himself asked of the audience at a presentation of *La mosquitera* in the Filmoteca de Catalunya. The Catalan film was released as part of the cinema cycle on ‘Bigas Luna and his world’ in 2012, accompanied by the film *Caniche* directed by Luna. After the screening, Vila addressed the following question to the public: ‘Què passaria si movem aquest límit una mica més enllà...’ [What would happen if we moved this limit a bit further?] (2012). In what follows, I will analyse the ways in which the film responds to this query.

Vulnerability and materiality: visual representations of the animals

With its clear intention to violate limits, *La mosquitera* addresses the phenomenon of existence as well as the distinction established between the human and the non-human from an ethical and aesthetic perspective that goes beyond the humanist or the genealogical. Here, I will show how the film is both clearly linked to the cinematic tradition of what Jonathan Burt (2002) called the ‘visual or cinematic animal’, and puts into practice a form of corporeal plenitude intended to foreground materiality. With this concept, Burt asserts both the complexity and agency of the animal on the screen and establishes a connection between cinema and the corporeal. Hence, even though critics like Natalia Farré have declared that *La mosquitera* ‘no tract[a] del món animal, sinó de les relacions familiars entre uns personatges que no accepten la part tràgica de la vida’ (Farré 2009) [it is not about the animal world, but about family relations between characters that do not accept the tragic aspect of life], there is strong evidence to the

contrary, in a film that contains six dogs and three cats, alongside numerous dead animals. I am of the opinion that the animal world is in fact the main protagonist, and that the coexistence between the two realms – or *families* – produces a complex materiality.

Inspired by the field of Animal Studies, more specifically, by Mathew Calarco's *Zoographies* (2008), J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* (1999) and by Jacques Derrida's renowned lectures published as *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2002), Anat Pick (2011) develops two basic considerations: on the one hand, the idea that the limit that separates the human from the animal is extraordinarily sensitive; and on the other, the notion that the interaction between animals and their representations condition human thought processes. Needless to say, both affirmations are paramount to understand the relevance of *La mosquitera's* treatment of the relationship between the human and non-human. Indeed, both the concept of vulnerability and multiple manifestations of André Bazin's notion of 'contingency' (2003) are essential to the analysis of the representation of the visual animal.

Simone Weil defined vulnerability as a sign of the beauty of existence, which is intrinsic to all living things, both materially and temporally: 'The vulnerability of precious things is beautiful because vulnerability is a mark of existence' (Weil [1947] (1953)); cited in Pick 2011: 3). In her above-mentioned volume, *Creaturely Poetics*, Pick (2011) draws on Weil in arguing that the relationship between vulnerability, existence and beauty is a common trait in various species and forms of organic life 'and so delivers us beyond the domain of the human' (3). The aesthetic perspective emphasised here marks an innovative change in orientation in the still emergent discipline of Animal Studies. More specifically, Pick proposes an alternative to the

prevailing discourse of interiority, and rather than focusing on aspects related to the subjective construction of the 'I', centres on all that configures the external reality of the subject and how it is related to reason and thinking. Weil's definition of vulnerability acquires special relevance when analysing the visual animal in *La mosquitera*. It particularly illuminates the interpretation of those sequences where cats and dogs quietly occupy the domestic space with their soft and silent movements. Far from representing a character role in the narrative, these animals function as living bodies whose main purpose is to exist, breathe and connect with the bodies and flesh of their cohabitants. Pertinent to this is the scene where several languid and sleepy bodies of cats and dogs lay on the dining table in the morning after Lluís's birthday party. Or the scene when Lluís caresses his cat Mao against his naked torso in an ambiguous gesture of proximity and love [figure 1].



Figure 1 © Agustí Vila

In this scene, the closeness between the human and the animal body is imbued with tension between intimacy and danger. While humming a soft melody, Lluís playfully caresses the hair of his cat Mao and inserts his fingers in its mouth touching daringly its

sharp teeth. Such corporeal dialogue is cleverly emphasised by the monochromatic tone and texture of the image that creates the visual illusion of a unique skin covering a whole body. This physical continuum between the cat's hair, Lluís's naked skin and the faux fur of the brown rug harks back to Weil's dismantling of hierarchies between species. Lluís and his cat lay on the floor and their horizontal position and plea for protection and love is also suggestive of their vulnerability. The two characters are exposed to the threat of an unexpected aggression: a cat plays with its victim before killing it, and Lluís has been playing with Mao before the cat jumps out of a window later on the film. Echoing Weil's definition of vulnerability, this approach to filming animals embodies the material weight of existence and establishes a visual bond with flesh, fluids and the presence of living things, whether human or non-human.

Complementary to this realist treatment of the image of the animal, *La mosquitera* also embraces a symbolic and ludic representation of the animal world. Alícia's beautifully violent drawings [figure 2] of pigeons and bleeding female bodies act as an anticipatory device in the film, with her imminent emotional scars predicted in the parallel plot that she outlines in these motile representations. In the interview with her editor, Alícia explains that the little girl standing by wounded women doesn't want to walk or even breathe because she is afraid of killing aunts or microbes. While her children's book illustrations echo one of the main topics of the film, that is, the question of vulnerability across the species, the film's incorporation of animals in non-cinematic artistic forms stresses the agency of the 'visual animal' (Burt 2002).



Figure 2 © Agustí Vila

Similarly, the recurrent display of paintings of hunters above the bed of the furtive lovers, Miquel and Ana, incorporates an additional metaphorical meaning to the competitive and predatory nature of the human relationships portrayed within the film. The illustration [figure 3] belongs to the famous *Livre de Chasse* written by Gaston Phébus (1387- 1389) that soon became a model on medieval hunting techniques. In the same way as Alícia's drawings, this example can also be interpreted in line with Burt's idea about asserting the representation of the visual animal by virtue of an interdisciplinary procedure. With regard to the film's narrative, this insertion of a hunting scene where a wild boar is about to be captured functions as another anticipatory device of the film's plot. Not only because it will predict the nature and subsequent ending of Miquel and Ana's relationship, where she is depicted as Miquel's temporary trophy; but also because it will anticipate Miquel's car killing of a young wild boar in la carretera de la Rabassada. A scene that will be revisited in the next section 'Compassion and Empathy as Ethical Responses to Vulnerability'. Such display of a series of interconnected elements has its parallel in the usage of linguistic and

visual symmetries, which as I argue at a later stage, aim to recreate the effect of imprisonment for all living bodies. Nonetheless, Vila's ongoing interactions between different artistic languages will reinforce one of the essential meanings of the film: the idea that there are no limits, either between the form and the content of *La mosquitera*, and that all spaces interact with each other by forming a common site for a continuous discharge of aggression.



Figure 3 © Agustí Vila

Yet, above all, the film's outward gaze enters into dialogue with European cinematic tradition, unveiling the heterogeneous textures of reality and providing the spectator with an experience – unusual within Catalan cinema – of filmic materialism. More specifically, Vila echoes the thinking of the theoretician André Bazin, according to whom the 'rediscovery' of reality has to include an elevated consciousness of the eclectic materiality of film. With a clear intention to broaden the limits of the traditional notion of probability, Bazin adopted contingency and the visceral as a measure of realism in the cinema, and focused on the '[i]mages that bear the marks of two heterogeneous realities, the film-making process and the filmed event' (in Marguiles

2003: 3). Above all, Bazin advocated a realist ontology for cinema, capable of accounting for the inherent complexity of reality, and of reclaiming the body in all its aspects. Images that foster contingency by means of the inclusion of marginal elements without a dramatic function, as witnessed in the case of the animals, both dead and alive, of *La mosquitera*, strengthen the importance of materialism in film by stressing the tangible authenticity of existence.

Nonetheless, Bazin's realist ontology for cinema is not the only influence that inspires the aesthetic forms and representations of the visual animal in Vila's film; it also calls for an ethical response, worthy of further examination. As shall be outlined below, the exploration of the presence and absence of empathy and compassion, and the conditions which make them possible as a response to the apprehension of beauty and vulnerability, is a recurrent feature of the film.

Compassion and Empathy as ethical responses to vulnerability

Before we can explore the ethical relations staged by the film, a further question needs to be addressed. Why film the presence of animals if, as critics such as John Berger in his essay 'Why look at animals?' ([1980] 2009) and Akira Lippit in *Electric Animal* (2000) consider the representation of animals in film as another symptom of the disappearance of the animal in modernity. Both critics argue that the modern world dissolves the empirical animal into pure spectrality (Burt 2002: 26). The answer to this question is a complex one, but I would like to begin by stressing that Vila is keen to counteract this progressive invisibility of the animal in modern life with the silent, albeit constant and overwhelming presence, of domestic animals that penetrate the most intimate spaces of the lives of the main characters of his film: from the opening scene

where Miquel and Alícia are welcomed by the dogs in their own house to the closing image of the same corridor where the two *families* now share a claustrophobic space in which the proximity of the animals is taken to the extreme. As seen with the above mentioned visual concatenations present in the drawings and the hunting painting, the persistent attention of the camera to the geometric forms of the family home, such as the identical closed window panes and the clinical colours of the upholstery, emphasises a sense of imprisonment by means of the visual metaphor of the cage, creating a space prone to what critics such as Ralph R. Acampora (2006) described as a rupture with empathy. Although empathy is currently used as the ability to experience the feelings of another person, in his *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie* ([1912] 1948) the philosopher Max Scheler (1874-1928) considered that empathy was a variation of sympathy. Scheler used the term sympathy as a generic one that comprehended several emotional states, such as, pity, compassion, identification and also empathy (Dillard-Wright 2007: 2). Despite the closeness between those terms and the fact that empathy and sympathy are frequently and inaccurately used as synonyms, it is relevant to note that this inclusive approach to the term is useful to my analytical purposes, precisely because Scheler argued that human sympathy was impossible without concern for all forms of life, including animals and plants (2017: 3). More interesting is the fact that this kind of sympathy (and empathy) in *La mosquitera* collapses when it takes place in claustrophobic and confined spaces such as the cage or the mosquito net. For Acampora (2006), such spaces are characterised by confusion, with a progressive substitution of the body – of that which is carnal – with the environment that encloses and holds it, namely, the cage. This process ultimately leads to the diminishment of the prospect of corporeal compassion, leaving the living beings exposed in all their vulnerability. If, for

Acampora, '[v]ulnerability dispassionately denotes the condition being embodied as necessarily limited, and limited by necessity, but always already encompassing the dialogic relation between bodies that underlines caring' (2006: 100), it follows that in these types of environments there might unfold events that transgress all ethical and moral limits. Such is certainly the case of the family villa in *Dogtooth*, and also of the apartment in *La mosquitera*. In the latter, by means of the repetition of certain visual and technical motifs, such as the position of lamps and decorative objects, the symmetry of mosaics and tiles, and the juxtaposition of close-up sequences during dialogues, Vila strategically uses an accumulation of symmetries to reinforce the feeling of suffocation and angst in the spectator. A sense of incarceration and enclosure is common in all domestic and even public spaces in *La mosquitera*. Paradoxically, it is worth noting that a feeling of limitedness and lack of freedom is also experienced in few of the scenes filmed outdoors. An example of this would be the scene when Lluís injects drug into his arm on a bench while surrounded by dogs and vegetation that create the illusion of a closed space in the park. In this film, trees, windows, walls, fences and any other erect physical obstacles frequently limit the freedom of the protagonists and cut the optical horizon of the spectator's gaze.

In respect of the domestic space, the apartment in *La mosquitera* gradually becomes a place for cats and dogs, which, almost imperceptibly, begin to impose their own habits [figure 4]. As a result of the permissive environment provided by Alicia and her adolescent son, who claims he adopts the animals in order to protect them, the animal invasion leads to a transformation in the behaviour of the human beings within the apartment, leading to a blurring of the boundaries between human and non-human. These limits will be further erased by a dehumanised use of language (an aspect that

will be discussed in more depth below, under ‘Visual Narrative and the Manipulation of Language’), used to mask the darkest taboos, such as incest, sexual abuse and even child torture.



Figure 4: © Agustí Vila

With the dissolution of the family unit, as represented in Alicia's expulsion of the head of the family, as a consequence of his affair with Ana and his obsession with cleanness and order, a somnolent and lethargic chaos begins to infiltrate a space that had been previously identified with obsessive order and cleanliness. Rather than characterised by violence, the transference of physicality between human beings and animals takes place in the context of perverse and obsessive neatness. Slowly the apparently ordered subjectivity of the characters is replaced by more primitive actions: the tribal movements of the seductive dance of Alicia, dressed in animal print clothing, with her son's friend, who is almost thirty years her junior; the hunting activities symbolised by Miquel's infidelity with the cleaning lady, Ana, and echoed in the painting over the hotel bed where they have illicit sexual relations [figure 3]; alongside

other more basic needs like eating, sleeping and copulating. In these actions, there is a heightening of what Pick has termed the plenitude of the body, in order to refer to the intensity of ‘connection between cinema and the corporal’ (2011: 6).

It is interesting to note, however, that this amoral spectacle is played out before the indifferent gaze of the cats and dogs that silently move amidst the furniture, establishing a somewhat cruel and satirical parallel with the experience of the spectator. Together with the strategic use of geometrical repetition and symmetry to suggest the cage, the particular emphasis on physicality here denies all possibility of empathy, both within and beyond the screen. The same type of primarily physical, sensorial interaction with the spectator manifests itself in a variety of examples that emphasise the cruelty of modern society in the course of the film. A pertinent scene is when Miquel runs over a wild boar when travelling at night with Ana on the carretera de la Rabassada. While Ana covers her ears in order to avoid hearing the horrific sounds of the animal's death throes, the spectator is partially protected by the introduction of music. However, to fully apprehend the extent to which the representation of material limits is used as a marker of vulnerability, it is important to analyse the interrelation that vulnerability itself maintains with the concepts of contingency (Bazin) and gravity (Weil).

Contingency and Gravity

In *Animals in Film* (2002), Burt warns of the danger of submitting the animal on screen to an excessive burden of metaphoric meanings, or what he calls ‘a kind of semantic overload’ (Burt 2001: 11), before going on to affirm that the image of the animal is in itself a form of rupture whose ambiguous nature is highly revealing of the position that the animal occupies in our culture. If this ambiguity is widely accepted and notoriously

difficult to avoid,⁴ the definition that Bazin offered in ‘The Virtues and Limitations of Montage’ (1965) proffers a fruitful point for reflection. According to Bazin, animals ‘are purveyors not so much of the “thing itself” as the markers of film’s representational limits: death, contingency and temporality’ (Bazin in Pick 111); for him, it is precisely the incarnation of these limits that will mark vulnerability and material finitude, along with the different levels of reality recreated by cinema. So, following Bazin’s conceptualisation, contingency is made manifest unexpectedly and incidentally, in those images that demonstrate the heterogeneity of cinematographic reality. This can be seen through the presence of visceral imprints that neither accelerate the narrative nor contribute to the development of suspense but instead have the function of stressing the material nature of cinema. Such elements are clearly present in *La mosquitera*. For instance, as Vila has himself reflected (in a talk recorded at the Filmoteca de Catalunya in 2012), the wounded dog goes through the entire process of filming wrapped in the silver foil which helps him to sleep. With the sole exception of the tragicomic scene of Mao, Lluís’s pet that commits suicide by jumping out of the window, no other animal will perform a particular role or be *anthropomorphised* in order to take on a diegetic function. On the contrary, cats and dogs leisurely move around the interior of the apartment, simply breathing and existing. In so doing, they remind the spectator that cinema does not only have a narrative function but it also contains live bodies that are susceptible to the passing of time. This ontological quality of the film is fully in line with Bazin’s reflections about filmic temporality and the consequent superimposition of reality and fiction, as Peter Wollen (1975) has shown:

Cinema was based on a natural automatism which cancelled the irreversibility of time, a rigorous determinism. This line of argument led Bazin to assert that

the ontology of the photographic image was inseparable from the ontology of its model, even that it was identical to it. By natural optical and photochemical processes, the being of the pro-filmic event (the objects within the camera's field of vision) was transferred to the being of the film itself, the image sequence registered and subsequently projected. (Wollen 1975: 7-8)

Yet at the same time, these images of bodily abandonment, both human and animal, have the aesthetic value of reconciling ideas of beauty, fragility and vulnerability, understood in the sense offered by Pick (2011: 6), 'as a form [or] mode of exposure', which may or may not produce an ethical response.

According to Weil, to be faced with the basic concrete and material conditions of life should generate love and compassion (1952: 5), but all too often the laws of nature or what Weil herself terms 'gravity' – 'the susceptibility of mind and body alike to earthly forces'(5) – do not allow this. Taking into account the mechanisms used to create a rupture with empathy in *La mosquitera*, as discussed in the previous section, it is not entirely surprising that the exhibition of vulnerability generates contradictory emotions and actions which sometimes result in violent situations. Just as Acampora conceives vulnerability as 'a corporal plea against violence, as if the other's body were saying "do not injure me"' (Acampora in Pick 2011: 14), so *La mosquitera* represents this second interpretation of vulnerability. In most cases, we can see this in the succession of instances of abuse that take place in each of the relationships between humans in the film (Miquel/Ana, Sergi/Alícia and Raquel/Raquel's daughter). Sergi, for example, physically and sexually assaults Alícia once she partakes in erotic play during one of their encounters. He does not understand where the limits of consent lie and misreads her expression of desire as the acceptance of violence. These types of

examples are recurrent throughout the film and corroborate the fact that the response to nudity, vulnerability and helplessness is not necessarily an ethical one, but can generate verbal, emotional or sexual aggression. Significantly, this more negative conception of vulnerability articulates what can be regarded as the diegetic aspect of the film, that is to say, the element that is connected to the plot, the events and the thinking of the characters.

Visual narrative and the manipulation of language

There is a sparing use of dialogue in *La mosquitera*, and where conversations between characters do occur, they tend to be characterised by their brevity. Even so, the use of language in this film constitutes an important mechanism for manipulation and dissimulation, as characters attempt to restore the social order. One of the most disconcerting scenes involves two consecutive dialogues between the two sisters, Alícia and Raquel, while seated on a couch at Raquel's house. Shortly after Alícia has explained the details about Sergi's attack, as described above, Raquel advises her, without hesitation: '—No és una violació, no dejes que te traumatice, ten pensament positiu. Si no te trató bien es mejor que no lo veas más' [It is not rape, don't allow this to traumatise you, be positive. If he did not treat you well it is better that you don't see him again]. This is a clear example of the use of linguistic conventions in the denial of reality. However, what the spectator does not expect is that, shortly afterwards, Alícia will mirror the same behaviour when Raquel confesses to her that she deliberately burned the hand of her daughter with a cigarette in order to punish her:

Alícia: Fue un accidente.

Raquel: No, no fue un accidente.

Alicia: No bromees, Raquel.

Raquel: No, no es broma. Le dije que no se moviera y le quemé en la mano. La niña se acercó demasiado. No puedo con ella, tengo una hija que me da miedo.

Alicia: It was an accident

Raquel: No, it wasn't an accident

Alicia: Don't joke, Raquel

Raquel: No, I am not joking. I told her not to move and I burned her hand. She got too close. I can't handle her, my daughter frightens me

Here, once more, the denial of reality is materialised in another form of symmetry; in this instance, by means of distorting the meaning of words, which, as in the case of *Dogtooth*, turns language into a tool for repression designed to contain the limits of the interior world. It is for this reason that the contrast between the brutality of the sister's actions with the neutral and conciliatory intonation of their conversations contributes to reinforce the two most symbolic images of the film: imprisonment and the hunt. The latter is turned into a motif that, following Nancy Condee, reduces 'the social to biological struggle without moral exemption for the human' (Condee 2009: 122-23). The frequent use of linguistic and visual symmetries, alongside the progressive fusion of the main spaces of the family home, the sixth form college and the hotel rooms, come together to form a narrative sequence based on a succession of situations of abuse. If we turn to the work of Jane A. Taubman (2005), we are reminded that the very presence of domestic animals in cinema could be construed as a mute protest against the inequalities in the organisation of matter and nature. With respect to *La Mosquitera*, it is clear that the film represents the predatory nature of humankind and its hierarchies of power.

However, Vila is not content to accept and reaffirm the passive observation of the spectator; instead, as we have seen, he engages directly with debates over realism in film in order to explore the different ways in which the body of the spectator can react to cinematic shock. The meta-theatrical scene mentioned earlier of the sensorial impact of the wild boar's suffering is just one example of the ways in which *La mosquitera* seeks to establish a somatic relationship with the spectator, who is drawn to experience the chain of abuses corporeally by means of a rhythmic and recurrent contrast between that which is observed and that which is heard. Paradoxically, the film becomes the protective cage between the interior world and the exterior, where the spectator is located.

An initial conclusion, on the basis of the aspects discussed in this article, might be that in *La mosquitera* Vila explores the ways in which the experience of film viewing and its reception is comparable to our sensory responses to the multiplicity of everyday stimuli. However, as I hope to have shown, the film's engagement with the sensorial body goes much further than this, and is part of broader debates around the construction of an alternative notion of subjectivity that is not based exclusively on the idea of an inner self, but is grounded in corporeality, materiality and the surface of the body, and marked by vulnerability.

The film's treatment of vulnerability is not simply to be seen in aesthetic terms, but includes extensive exploration of the spectator's ethical responsibility when vulnerability is exposed. Nonetheless, perhaps the most remarkable contribution of the film is its ability to inquire into the ways in which vulnerability is interrelated with cinema and other artistic expressions – in particular, through its inclusion of other art forms such as painting and illustration, as well as its connection with the idea of

compassion. Vulnerability in *La mosquitera* constitutes the axis that articulates a philosophical discourse on the fragile boundaries between the animal and the human. Through the film's formal and conceptual use of symmetry, vulnerability can be interpreted as a cry for compassion or a sign of violence permissiveness. Yet, above all, it is experienced as a thread that connects all species and organic forms of life, underlining its centrality to the formulation of an alternative representation of living bodies (human/animal), that may take us beyond the limits of our anthropocentric tradition. Returning now to Vila's initial statement about the possibility of expanding limits, *La mosquitera* itself becomes representative of a corporeal and material cinema that interrogates the boundaries between what is real and what is represented.

Notes:

¹ According to Fisher (2011: 27), the control of language is essential for the father's scheme of domination. The film opens with a scene where the children listen attentively to a cassette that reproduces the following words: 'a sea is a leather armchair with wooden arms like the one we have in our living room'. Exterior elements thus become interior, which could or could not be threatening, but in all cases the meaning is already established 'by the father and mother's linguistic micro-despotism'.

² See, for instance, Judith Butler's *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) and Mark S. Robert's *The Mark of the Beast: Animality and Human Oppression* (2008), for an analysis of the history of dehumanization and animalization of those who are deemed 'inferior'.

³ *About Love* recreates the natural habitat that emerges from a woman's desire to rescue and rehome abandoned dogs in a minuscule apartment, and succeeds in reproducing the

horrors and generosity of love in a space that is totally dominated by the bodies, the sounds and the odours produced by the group of animals that inhabit the apartment.

⁴ Burt refers to postmodern readings of the image of the animal in which there has been a tendency to read them as 'unstable signifiers' (2001:11).

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Elisenda Marcer is Lecturer in Catalan Studies at the University of Birmingham. She specializes in contemporary Catalan literature and culture with a particular interest in poetry and inter-artistic and interdisciplinary phenomena. Marcer is the author of the volume *Ressonàncies: veus i ecos en la poesia de Gabriel Ferrater* (2013) and has co-authored the *Historical Dictionary of The Catalans* (2011) with Helena Buffery. She

has also published articles on Montserrat Abelló, Maria- Mercè Marçal, Josep Palau i Fabre, Joan Mayorga and, more recently, on Catalan experimental cinema.